

The Concept of Rest in Hebrews 4: eschatological and soteriological aspects

Ovidiu Hanc¹

ABSTRACT

In this article we will analyze the concept of rest as it appears in the Old and New Testaments. The understanding of the concept of rest in Hebrews 4 is based sine qua non on the Old Testament concept of rest. We will also look at how the concept is presented in the Gospels in relation to the person and work of Jesus and the theological nuances that are present in Hebrew 4.

KEY WORDS: rest, Sabbath, work, Christology, throne of grace.

INTRODUCTION

Hebrews 4 represents the *locus classicus* of the concept of rest in the New Testament. The term κατάπαυσις (*katapausis*) appears eight times in the New Testament (once in Acts 7.49), out of which seven times are found in Hebrews (twice in chapter 3 in v.11, 18 and five times in chapter 4 in v.1, 3, 5, 10, 11). The verbal form καταπαύω (*katapauō*) appears four times in the New Testament (once in Acts 14.18) out of which three times are found in Hebrews 4 (v.4, 8, 10). Hofius noted that both noun and verb appear in the NT only once in Acts and in Heb 3:7–4:13 (the noun 8 times, the vb. 3 times), but except in Acts 14:18, where the verb has the meaning *dissuade* someone from something, the two words have a religious usage in all NT occurrences.²

The related word ἀνάπαυσις (*anapausis*) is found in the gospels (Matt. 11.29; 12.43; Lk. 11.24) and Revelation (4.8; 14.11) while the verbal form ἀναπαύω (*anapauō*) is found twelve times in various places without an extended use in a certain passage.³ Another term related to the concept of rest is that of Sabbath. The main nuance of the term σάββατον (*sabbaton*) is that of cessation from labor, a special Jewish day of sacred rest and worship.

¹ Dr. Ovidiu Hanc, BA (Emanuel); MTh (QUB Belfast); PhD (QUB, Belfast) is lector universitar in Emanuel. ovidiu.hanc@emanuel.ro.

² O. Hofius, “Κατάπαυσις, Εως, ἤ,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 265.

³ Matt. 11.28; 26.45; Mk. 6.31; 14.41; Lk. 12.19; 1 Cor. 16.18; 2 Cor. 7.13; Phlm. 1.20; 1 Pet. 4.14; Rev. 6.11; 14.13.

THE CONCEPT OF REST IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The concept of rest שָׁבַט (*sha.vat*) means “to cease; to stop working; to rest” and appears for the first time at the end of the creation week (Genesis 2.1-3) as God rested from His act of creation.⁴ The Jewish literature speaks clearly of a “day” of seven days that culminates with a day of rest.

The term שַׁבָּת (*shab.bat*) appears for the first time in Exodus 16.23-29 and then in Exodus 20.8-11 as part of the Decalogue. The Sabbath was set before the people of Israel as one of the most important parts of the law.⁵ Dressler analyzed the origin of the etymology and the meaning of the word שַׁבָּת and concludes that lexicographers failed to produce conclusive evidence for an alternative origin of the Sabbath, and correctly suggested that the Sabbath originated with Israel and with the Sabbath came the seven-day week.⁶

Genesis presents the fact that God created the world in six days, and then He rested on the seventh day. God sanctified this day of rest. The essence of rest is not that of recovery from hard labor, but of contemplation and enjoyment of what was done. God did not rest because He was tired, but sanctified this day that becomes a necessary part in the mandate of work and rest. J. C. Laansma argued that “work is intrinsic to created human existence, reflecting the divine pattern of work and rest,”⁷ while Kidner argued that the rest is an expression of achievement, not inactivity, for God nurtures what he creates. This symbolism is seen also in the fact that Jesus was ‘seated’ after his finished redemption (Heb. 8:1; 10:12), to dispense its benefits.⁸

In the pattern of creation, the day of rest marks an interruption of the pattern that is found on each day of creation. The lack of the expression “there was evening and there was morning” is not an omission of the author, but rather an eschatological indicator of a greater rest that is found in God.

Kidner emphasized correctly that the absence of the formula that rounded off each of the six days with the onset of evening and morning, imply the “infinite

⁴Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 697.

⁵ Harold H. P. Dressler, “The Sabbath in the Old Testament,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 22.

⁶ Dressler, 23.

⁷ J. C. Laansma, “Rest,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity Diversity of Scripture*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000).

⁸ Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, vol. 1, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 63.

perspective” of God’s sabbath.⁹ Hebrews 4 indicates that God’s rest in Genesis not only foreshadows a sabbath rest, but an eschatological eternal rest that is available for the believer in Christ.

After the deliverance from Egypt, God established the Sabbath as a day sanctified for the Lord (Ex. 16.1-30) that was unknown to the people of Israel who were accustomed with the ten-day week. Dressler followed Parker and argued that the sojourn in Egypt had taught them regarding this ten-day ‘week’.¹⁰ The Decalogue refers to the day of rest as a day that must be sanctified (Ex. 20.8-11). The fourth commandment is the most elaborate one and refers to God’s rest that becomes a norm for the newly formed covenantal people. This commandment is expanded even more in Deut. 5.12-15 with more details, where the rest has soteriological nuances (v.15). The rest on the seventh day symbolizes the salvation of the people from the bondage of Egypt. The Israelites should remember this day as they were slaves in Egypt but now they are delivered from this slavery/work by God’s mighty hand. As God’s rested from His work, He similarly delivered the people of Israel from their work/slavery and blessed them with opportunity to rest. Thus, the Sabbath is not only a paradigm of rest, but also of salvation. The sabbath becomes a sign of the eternal covenant with God (Ex. 31.12-17), while breaking the Sabbath was equivalent to a desecration of this sacred covenant and was punished by death.

The gift of rest” is an important OT theme for the people of God as they journey in the land of promise. This ‘resting place’ is in no way an image of blissful inactivity, rather one of unhampered constructive activity.¹¹ As the people entered the promised land, they become disobedient. Disobedience was reflected not only in immoral living, but also in ignorance toward the sabbath rest. The Babylon captivity is partially caused by the failing to keep the sabbath (2 Chron. 36.21). The generation in the wilderness did not enter God’s rest (Ps. 95.11), while later generations did not keep God’s rest (Jer. 17.21-27; Ez. 20.12-24; Amos 8.5).

The Sabbath is a practical reflection of the concept of holiness as an act of being set apart. On the Sabbath day, the people of Israel were called to set the day apart for God. As they departed from God, they disrespected the day of rest and considered it a burden.

⁹ Kidner, 1:63.

¹⁰ Dressler, “The Sabbath in the Old Testament,” 24; Richard Anthony Parker, “The Calendars and Chronology,” in *The Legacy of Egypt*, ed. Richard Anthony Parker, Gerald J. Toomer, and Erik Iversen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

¹¹ J. C. Laansma, “New Dictionary of Biblical Theology.”

THE CONCEPT OF REST IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The concept of rest is interwoven with the Sabbath day, as the day of rest par excellence. The term שַׁבָּת (*shab.bat*) is transliterated into the Greek as σάββατον.¹² In the New Testament, the rest has Christological overtones (Matt. 11.28-30). Christ's promise of rest is an indicator of his divine nature since only God is the true source of rest (Ex. 33.14; Ps. 116.7; Jer. 6.16). Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath (Mt. 12.8; Mk. 2.10; Lk. 6.5). Carson argued correctly that the Sabbath itself is associated with the theme of restoration and the messianic age and within such a framework the very concept begins to undergo transformation. "That Jesus Christ is Lord of the Sabbath is not only a messianic claim of grand proportions, but it raises the possibility of a future change or reinterpretation of the Sabbath, in precisely the same way that His professed superiority over the Temple raises certain possibilities about ritual law."¹³

All the Gospel passages that present the controversies over the Sabbath day reflect a high Christology. Jesus is presented as being equal to the Father, therefore He is Lord over the Sabbath. Jesus does the same works His Father performs (Jn. 5.17-18), an indicator of divine prerogatives. The many healings that Jesus has done on the Sabbath day (e.g. Mt. 12.10; Mc. 3.2; Lc. 6.7; 13.14; 14.3; Jn. 5.10) reflect a deeper meaning of the Sabbath. Schreiner noted that by healing on the Sabbath, Jesus indicated that the Sabbath must be interpreted eschatologically and Christologically as well, for it points to the final rest that the Lord will grant to his people.¹⁴ The Gospels present the Sabbath disputes not from the legal framework, but from a Christological lens. This lens is determinant when it comes to a theological understanding of the concept of rest.

W. D. Davies argued for the notion of replacement in John's Gospels.¹⁵ Jesus replaces the ancient Tabernacle, the Jewish holy space with its holy water, the vine, the feasts. Carson suggests that Jesus Himself replaces the Sabbath, a possible suggestion that might be linked with Hebrews 4.¹⁶ Jesus becomes the rest of the believers.

¹² Burge, *Jesus and the Jewish Festivals*, 24.

¹³ D. A. Carson, "Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 66.

¹⁴ Thomas Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 620.

¹⁵ W. D. Davies, *Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 315, 335.

¹⁶ Carson, "Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels," 84.

The conflicts between Jesus and the Jews have as a starting point the relation to the Sabbath. This conflict is a fundamentally Christological issue. The Sabbath-day healings points to Jesus' work of salvation and deliverance. John shows that Jesus is equal to the Father, so he does the same things as the Father. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, so He has all the authority to rule over the Sabbath. Jesus' argument is that God, although He stopped all creative work on the seventh day, He does not stop His activity. It was recognized that God is continually active even on the Sabbath, supporting the whole world through His providence (Jn. 5.17-18). In a sense, God's rest is entirely an eschatological reality. Jesus is working even on a Sabbath day, as His Father does. Jesus intentionally causes a conflict with the rabbis over their legalistic way of keeping the Sabbath.¹⁷ When religious leaders were confronted with a miracle performed on the Sabbath, they did not question the possibility of Jesus' power being of divine origin but focused entirely on the Sabbath violation.

Klink notes that in the pericope of the healing of the lame man on the Sabbath (Jn. 5), the focus is only indirectly on the Sabbath and its laws, for its direct focus is the God of the Sabbath. The main theme of what follows is not "the violation of the Sabbath" but the violation of the personal power of God.¹⁸ The Sabbath, together with other Jewish feasts are pointers to Jesus.

In John 7, the Jewish leaders wanted to kill Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. It is obvious that Jesus had not broken the Law, so He justifies His healing done on the Sabbath day, bringing up the discussion about the circumcision ceremony (vv. 22-24). Circumcision was to be performed on the eighth day after birth (Gen. 17.10-14). The moment God gave the law on the Sabbath, the two laws would inevitably come into conflict. The resolution of this dilemma took place through a hierarchy of laws in which circumcision preceded the Law of Moses (see Mishnah *Shabbath* 18.3; 19.2-3; *Nedarim* 3.11).¹⁹

By this prioritization of the Laws, we deduce not only that Jesus is a good interpreter of the Mosaic law, but we also understand the authority He has in relation to the Sabbath. Just as circumcision was seen in the Old Testament as superior to the Sabbath law, now Jesus is superior to the Sabbath Law. This aspect of Jesus' sovereignty over Sabbath is described by the synoptic Gospels in Mt. 12.8; Mk. 2.28; and Lk. 6.5.

¹⁷ Carson, *From Sabbath*, 80-81.

¹⁸ Edward W. Klink, *John*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2016), 273.

¹⁹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 243.

In John 9, Jesus healed a man born blind on a Sabbath day. John's highlighting the timing on a Sabbath day reflects his high Christology. Keener argues that Jesus' claim to divine authority as God's *shaliach* to adapt Sabbath rules is the actual calendrical issue in chapter 5 and 9 (esp. 5.9 and 9.14).²⁰ John presents Jesus as the Son of God and thus standing above the Sabbath.

THE CONCEPT OF REST IN HEBREWS: CITATIONS AND ALLUSIONS

Hebrews 3.11 is the first time when the author uses the concept of rest. The verse quotes Psalm 95.7-11 where God swore in His wrath that the Israelites that hardened their heart in rebellion in the wilderness will not enter His rest (c.f. Num. 14.28-35). This theme is still active through Christ, since the good news of entering God's rest that was heralded to them (εὐαγγελίζομαι *euangelizomai*) is available to us as well (v.2). The author expands this concept since in Hebrews 4.4 he cites from Genesis 2.2. Thus, the theme of rest is not only referring to the rest of the promised land but reflects a much bigger reality that was inaugurated at the end of creation.

Hebrews 4 combines two distinctive OT nuances that covers the fact that God rested at the end of creation week (v.4) and the final entering into the promised land under the leadership of Joshua (v.8). Bauernfeind argued that comprehensive reflection on these two facts leads to the conclusion that the OT points beyond itself, and that the rest is still in the sphere of promise. "A true fulfilment of the task of Joshua, as Ps. 95:7 ff. also demonstrates, v. 7, will take a different form from the historical."²¹ The concept of rest is used as a warning toward perseverance into God's eternal rest. The text has a soteriological and an eschatological dimension in the reference to God's eternal rest.

The concept of rest has a soteriological dimension. In v.2 the rest is defined in relation to the good news that came to us just as to them (καὶ γὰρ ἔσμεν εὐηγγελισμένοι ...). The way someone enters in God's rest is through the message of the Gospel, a reflection of the good news that was given to the people of Israel. The use of the present tense in v. 3 (εἰσερχόμεθα) and the aorist in v.10 (εἰσελθὼν) as a reference to entering God's rest is an indicator of this salvation as a present reality. O'Brien strongly argues that the Sabbath rest is only a future reality.²² Although his case is very well argued, the consummation of a reality

²⁰ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 635.

²¹ Otto Bauernfeind, "Καταπαύω, Κατάπασις," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 627.

²² Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 165–66.

in the future, does not nullify an inauguration of this reality in the present. An attempt to dissociate the future from the present reality solves a tension that needs to be present in the text.

However, the concept of rest has an eschatological dimension as well. In v.10 the author described the act of entering God's rest using an aorist as an action that was already fulfilled, while in v.11 the exhortation to strive to enter that rest is seen as a reality in the future that is to be consummated. The rest from the works is an allusion to the new soteriological dimension in which salvation is not through the fulfilment of the requirements of the Law.²³ Thus, the rest is synonym to salvation through faith.

For the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, obedience and faith are two complementary concepts. In verse 3 the author notes that the Israelites did not enter in God's rest because they did not have faith, and later in verse 6 they did not enter because they did not listen.

Bauernfeind correctly noted that as the promise of Scripture undoubtedly points beyond the servant Moses to the Son (3:1–6), so the rest mentioned on creation (Gen. 2:2) points beyond Joshua (4:8) and David (4:7) to the last things.²⁴ The eschatological dimension of rest is seen in the tension of already but not yet. The believer entered God's rest, but simultaneously waits for the coming rest. Commenting on the healing of the blind man, in his commentary on the Gospel of John, Carson argues that in the Hebrews' passage the "sabbath-rest" is part of a pattern of "rests" in the Old Testament: the seventh day, the rest of entering into the Promised Land, the promise of rest in the Psalms. Carson correctly noted that the conclusion is drawn that there is still a rest for the people of God, a rest that can be entered and enjoyed by faith in Christ.²⁵ This rest represents a deliverance from dead works and a partaking in the salvation brought by Christ.

The warning regarding the necessity of perseverance is an indicator the rest is in one sense not yet inaugurated. This perseverance implies a perseverance in grace as opposed to the works of the Law. There is a necessary rest from the works of the Law, but also a necessary perseverance and approach to the throne of grace. Just as disobedience and disbelief had consequences for those who came out of Egypt, so it will have consequences for those who reject the good news of Christ's rest and return to Jewish law.

²³ Donald Alfred Hagner, *Hebrews* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 72.

²⁴ Bauernfeind, "Καταπαύω, Κατάπαυσις," 627.

²⁵ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 248.

Marshall noted that the act of entering God's rest combine elements of the present and the future.²⁶ The concept of rest contains the implied contrast between Joshua (the Greek word for Joshua is *Iēsous*) who did not give rest and the new Joshua who can do so.²⁷ Joshua is an archetype of Jesus Christ. Just as Joshua brought the people of God to Canaan, so Jesus Christ brings the people of faith to His Kingdom.

The book of Hebrews is indeed a book of contrasts. From the beginning we can find many explicit, but also implicit comparisons between angels, Moses, Joshua, Levitical priesthood, old covenant, tabernacle, sacrifices, high priest, prophets, and the superiority of Christ.

The author uses positive comparisons rather than negative contrast. This gives a high value to the description of the superiority of Christ. He is not contrasted with negative realities but compared with the most valued aspects of Jewish faith. Christ is not contrasted with a decadent person, but with the serving angels, faithful Moses and so on.

When it comes to the rest as the ultimate symbol of redemption from the bondage of Egypt by entering in the promised Land, the rest that Jesus offers is much better than what they received through Joshua.

THRONE OF GRACE: RULE AND REST

The throne of grace that is mentioned in v.16 is a symbol of dominion. However, it is vital not to dissociate the theme of a throne from the main theme of the passage, the theme of rest. The mention of the throne portends the nuance of *rule* but also of *rest*.

The main theme of rest is followed by the exhortation to strive to enter God's rest avoiding disobedience of the word of God. The tension between resting and striving is noteworthy. The element that motivates both the call to rest and the challenge to strive to enter the rest is Jesus as the great High Priest.

The conjunctive particle οὖν (*oun*) of verse 14 indicates that the mention of the work of the great high priest is to be connected to what was said before. What is striking in relation to a high priest and the concept of rest is the fact that the high priest did not have a chance to rest. The sacrifices were offered continually (διηλεκής *diēnekēs*) (Heb. 10.1). The one element that the Tabernacle is lacking

²⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 618.

²⁷ Marshall, 623.

is that of a chair – an element of rest. The tabernacle had the Table for the Presence (Ex. 25.23-30), but not a chair that the priests could use for resting. The author of Hebrews notes that the offerings were brought daily (Heb. 10.11), and only Jesus as a great high priest offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins and sat down at the right hand of God (Heb. 10.12).

Jesus is the only high priest that is presented as sitting after offering a sacrifice. The act of sitting down is twofold in this context. First, there is the element of a finished work and secondly there is the element of divine reign. This element of Jesus as a high priest that sits on the throne is presented in Hebrews 4 with the same double nuance of *rest* and *rule*.

The tabernacle has an element that refers to the act of sitting related to the Ark of the Covenant. The mercy seat (כַּפֹּרֶת, *kap.po.ret*) was the gold lid that covered the Ark of the Covenant that had an artwork of two cherubim with their wings overshadowing the mercy seat (Ex. 25.17-21; 26.34; 37.6-9; Lev. 16.13-15).²⁸ The mercy seat rested on the ark and signified God's throne (1 Sam. 4.4; 2 Sam. 6.2; 2 Kg. 19.15; 1 Chron. 13.6). There is a thematic equivalent between the mercy seat and the throne of grace where mercy can be received (Heb. 4.16). In the Old Testament, the mercy seat was the meeting place between God and His people (Ex. 25.22), while now, through Jesus, people can access the throne of grace.

Thus, the concept of rest in Hebrews 4 has not only an eschatological dimension, but also a soteriological one. Christ is the only high priest that rests on a seat, and the seat is a throne. This is an allusion to the mercy seat that was on the ark of the covenant – the symbol of God's presence. The fact that Jesus, the Son of God sits, signifies his dominion and his salvation that was possible only through the mercy of God.

CONCLUSION

The concept of rest in Hebrews 4 is complex and it is linked to three Old Testament realities. The first mention of rest in Heb. 3.11; 4.3, 5 reverberates with Ps. 95.7-11. The second citation of Heb. 4.4 reverberates with the creation

²⁸ The term for the mercy seat that is used in the Septuagint is that of propitiation: ἱλαστήριος (*hilastērios*). The reason that lies behind this translation is the fact that the Hebrews term for mercy seat (כַּפֹּרֶת *kap.po.ret*) has the root verb to cover (כָּפַר, *ka.phar*). Hence the LXX translators used the word propitiation to emphasize the concept of covering sins. This term appears in the New Testament in Rom. 3.25 and Heb. 9.5, while the cognate word ἱλασμός (*hilasmos*) appears in 1 Jn. 2.2 and 4.10.

account of Gen. 2.2, while the third allusion of Heb. 4.8 reverberates with Joshua 1.13, 15.

These citations and allusions make us understand that the concept of rest is much broader than the mere physical reality. The rest that is presented in Heb. 4 has an explicit eschatological connotation in which the tension already (4.10) but not yet (4.11) is found. The rest is a future reality, but at the same time a present one. The eschatological nuance of rest should not be dissociated from its soteriological overtone. In Hebrews 3-4 the concept of rest has several biblical roots in the rest of Genesis 2, in the rest in the promised land, and in the eschatological rest promised in the book of Psalms. At the same time, the concept of rest must be understood in the light of Jesus, as High Priest – the only priest described as sitting. The fact that this chair is a throne, is a twofold reflection of a Divine King and unique High Priest. Thus, the aspect of rest should not be dissociated from that of reign. Jesus Christ is greater than Moses and Joshua in the fact that He is the only one that offered a real rest. Moses failed to offer a rest, while the one offered by Joshua was unsatisfactory. Jesus not only offers a rest (both present and future), but He is the only High Priest that is resting. His rest is not only a reflection of fulfilment but also of reign in both eschatological and soteriological aspects.

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